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^Webster Wanted To Leave Before He Was Forced Out^

^By JOHN P. WALLACH^

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WASHINGTON -- CIA Director William Webster, whose resignation took the nation's capital by surprise Wednesday, believed that a shadowy cabal of White House officials was gunning for him, according to a source close to Webster.

The source, a high intelligence official who declined to be identified, said Webster felt that if he tried to stay on in his post for another year, he would have been forced out.

The source also quoted Webster as saying just after President Bush announced the CIA chief's resignation, "This was all my initiative. I didn't want them coming for me. I wanted the high ground. I didn't want to be pushed."

But Webster added, according to the source, "If I had stayed for another year, I would have been (pushed)."

Webster took the CIA post in 1987, replacing the ailing William Casey, whose involvement in the Iran-contra scandal of the Reagan administration was revealed after he died of brain cancer later that year. Bush asked Webster to keep the CIA focused on intelligence and not policy matters.

On Capitol Hill Wednesday, Webster won high praise for doing just that. "After our experience with Director Casey, he was just what the doctor ordered," said Rep. Anthony Beilenson, D-Calif., former chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

But the CIA came in for strong criticism for intelligence gaps before and during the Persian Gulf War. For instance, it estimated about a week before Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's takeover of Kuwait that he would use force. But the agency did not expect that he would seize the entire country.

During the war, Webster was criticized for allegedly "worst-casing," or overestimating, Iraq's military capabilities, thereby exaggerating the Iraqi threat so he would look good after the war.

He told friends, however, that he did not believe that had anything to do with the campaign to oust him, the intelligence source said.

Bush also denied in his news conference that intelligence failures during the Gulf War played any role in Webster's departure. The president said he had "no complaints whatsoever" about the work done by the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

"So we all got criticism. CIA got a little. Defense Department got a little. We took on some water over here. But the result was superb and the intelligence was outstanding and the community performed fantastically."

Webster, the intelligence source said, thought about resigning the entire month of April but told only Defense Secretary Dick Cheney about his plan.

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Webster informed Bush about his decision at their regular breakfast meeting last Thursday. They had planned to announce it Monday but did not because Bush was hospitalized over the weekend with an irregular heart beat.

A number of factors contributed to Webster's decision, the source said, including the fact that his normal role of providing a daily intelligence briefing to the president had been taken over by the National Security Council, which sifts CIA and other intelligence data.

Webster was thus reduced to seeing the president three times a week, generally for breakfast, and always in the company of National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, who heads the NSC and Robert Gates, deputy NSC director.

"He (Gates) has to be No. 1 on his (the president's) list," the source quoted Webster as saying. Gates was President Reagan's first choice to head the CIA after Casey's departure in 1987.

But Gates was forced to withdraw his nomination after coming under congressional criticism for his role in the Iran-contra affair, in which the Reagan administration secretly sold arms to Iran to secure the release of U.S. hostages, and used the profits to supply weapons to the contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Gates might have trouble getting confirmed this time, also because of Iran, a White House source said Wednesday.

But Sen. William Cohen, R-Maine, a former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said, "I would recommend someone like Bob Gates" for the job. "I believe that he would be able to be confirmed notwithstanding the questions that were raised" in 1987. Cohen said that "emotions were high (then) and I think that he was not given fair or full consideration of the job that he had done."

The Iran issue has re-surfaced amid allegations that Bush took part in an illegal 1980 effort between Iran and the Reagan campaign, headed by Casey, to prolong the captivity of American hostages and thus damage Jimmy Carter's chances against Reagan. On Wednesday, Bush called the charges "grossly untrue, factually incorrect, bald-faced lies."

There also has been speculation that another former CIA official, James Lilley, might replace Webster. Lilley is departing Friday as the U.S. ambassador to China.

In preparing to leave the CIA, Webster was quoted by a friend as saying: "When my record is looked at, no one can say I was vulnerable. I'm not under siege. No one is saying I've failed."

Before taking over the CIA, Webster, 67, had earned a good reputation during his nine years as head of the FBI.

Webster told a friend Wednesday he did not know definitely who in the White House was trying to force him out. He was said to believe that Gates may have been behind some anonymous administration leaks that have plagued Webster for more than a year.

In that time, newspapers have reported that Bush was unhappy with the job Webster was doing and wanted to replace him. But each time such a story surfaced, Bush went to great pains to reassure Webster, even visiting CIA headquarters to bolster his morale.

The intelligence source said the only story that really got to Webster was one that appeared last month in the Philadelphia Inquirer. In it, an anonymous White House official was quoted as saying Webster was "pathetic" in his job and that he was so inarticulate that he could not complete a sentence.

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Webster asked Gates about the leak, and the NBC official told him, according to the source, who was present at the meeting: "Look, Bill, I'm not behind it. I'm one of your strongest supporters around here."

That apparently did little to assuage Webster's feelings that he was being hounded out. When a friend asked Webster about his personal relationship with Bush, the CIA chief said: "It was good." He pointedly stopped short of saying it was very good or great.

Webster was described as being eager to return to private law practice in the nation's capital. He was a former federal appellate judge and district court judge, and he served as U.S. attorney in St. Louis before heading the FBI.

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